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ABSTRACT

A test group of 78 students in advanced journalism courses at Ohio University were assigned the role of "editor" in an attempt to determine whether newspaper editors can predict the preferences of their readers. Seventy-eight other students from classes in mass communication, introductory psychology, and journalism were assigned the role of newspaper reader and were requested to rank their level of interest in a set of news stories taken from late December 1971 and January 1972 issues of the "New York Times," "Los Angeles Times," "Detroit News," "Washington Post," "Columbus Citizen-Journal," and "Athens Messenger." On the basis of these data, editors were asked to predict how the same audience would rank a second set of similar news stories. The newspaper readers also took a Rokeach personality test. From the resulting information about readers' values,the editors predicted the preferences of individual readers. The accuracy of the editors' predictions, along with the degree to which editors projected their own preferences onto the audience, was examined. Resulting data supported the hypothesis that making judgments and comparisons from one sample of stories to another aided prediction of readers' levels of interest in news stories. Surprisingly, informing editors about audience values and preferences did not reduce the projection of views onto audiences. (EE)

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FACTORS INFLUENCING COORIENTATION VARIABLES IN NEWS JUDGMENT

by

Hugh M. Culbertson

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The literature on news judgment has focused heavily on story characteristics such as proximity, consequence and sensationalism (1, p. 275; 3, pp 32-45; 7, pp. 24-31; and 14), editor biases and vested interests (5, 10), and mechanical factors such as size of newshole and time of deadline (12, 13 and 16). Only a few researchers have begun to look closely at shared values and prespectives between newsman and news source (4) as well as between newsman and audience (8).

Obviously, an editor or a radio-tv news director cannot ignore audience preferences, though he will often not cater to them slavishly. The "editorial game" approach suggested by MacLean and Kao (8) has promise in both training and research related to a newsman's emphathy with his audience. The present study seeks to build on their pioneering effort by: a) increasing the rigor and amount of information obtained through application of the co-orientation model (2) to news evaluation, and b) extending their work on pictures into the realm of news copy.

MacLean and Kao (8) chose two varied batches of 60 news photos each. A small group of "audience members" sorted one batch from most to least preferred. Then a few editors, paired up one-on-one with audience members, sought to predict ratings by the latter. The correlation between editor prediction and audience rating was the index of predictive success.

General background data about audience traits such as socioeconomic status and church membership boosted editor predictive success somewhat when compared with a control group. However, information about audience preferences for a second batch of pictures led to a more dramatic boost. The tentative conclusion---if you wish to predict <u>future</u> reader preferences, study <u>past</u> ratings of a like sample of messages.

The basic research strategy used here should have implications for interpersonal as well as mass communication. Coorientation studies in both areas have multiplied rapidly in recent years, but few experiments have sought to identify types of "input" which might influence congruency and predictive accuracy within a dyad.

Statement of Hypotheses

It would seem that an editor can predict audience preferences in at least two ways:

1. By using judgment of previous news items as a basis for predicting later ratings. MacLean and Kao (8) found this strategy can work with photos. It involves seemingly straightforward reasoning from a sample of items to a hypothetical population of possible ones. Inferences about the population, in turn, are used to predict assessment of a second sample.

2. By picturing the reader's values and inferring what stories would tend to interest him. This approach would seem indirect and difficult---to begin with, news choice doubtless depends on situational factors and specific attitudes quite apart from basic values. Nevertheless, such reasoning might be of some help. For example, a person who values excitement as a life goal may prefer sensational, bizarre, fast-moving stories.

To permit use of the first strategy, predictors (called editors) were given information about how predictees (called audience members) ranked one set of stories. Editors then used these data in predicting audience ranking of a second set.

To get at the second approach, audience members ranked a set of life goals or basic values proposed by Rokeach (11) from 1 (most important to one personally) to 18 (least important). Editors then used this information to predict news preferences.

Two dimensions of editor behavior were examined:

1. Accuracy of prediction. That is, how close did an editor come to predicting the preferences of a particular audience member?

2. Extent of editor projection or congruency. The question here--- to what degree did an editor simply attribute his own views to an audience member?*

Four basic hypotheses were tested, and they are cast below in theoretic (as opposed to null) form.

First, predictive accuracy should be greater where editors(predictors) have information about previous audience news preferences than where editors lack such information.

Second, predictive accuracy should be greater where editors have information about audience value orientation than where they lack such data.

Third, congruency or projection of news preferences should be lower where editors learn of previous audience preferences than where they lack such information.

Fourth, congruency or projection should be lower where editors learn of audience value orientation than where they lack such information.

The rationale behind hypotheses 3 and 4 is simple. An editor should tend to rely less on his own views when he knows something about the audience than when he has little or no such information.

It was expected that the predicted effects would be more marked with hypotheses 1 and 3(presumed to involve the rather straightforward reasoning from sample to population of news stories) than with hypotheses 2 and 4(thought to

*It's interesting to note that editors disagree on the ethical and practical desirability of high congruency or projection. Market research, increasingly common in recent years, seemingly gives an editor something other than his own views in predicting audience preferences. However, Norman Cousins and other magazine people emphasize that the editor should be "true to himself" in judging article value. To slavishly follow leads from audience study, in their view, would lead to superficiality and perhaps hypocrisy.

reflect the more nebulous process of predicting from audience values).

Exploratory analyses dealing with the impact of value-orientation information on news judgment will be given in the findings section.

METHODOLOGY

Choice of stories

Sixty stories were initially clipped from late December 1971 and January 1972 issues of the New York Times, Los Angeles Times, Detroit News, Washington Post, Columbus Citizen-Journal and Athers Messenger. All stories chosen had gotten front-page or multi-column inside-page play, implying fairly high value in the eyes of professional newsmen.

To insure a broad cross section of stories, approximately equal numbers dealt with state-local(southeastern Ohio), national and international news. Also, roughly equal numbers featured timely "hard" news on the one hand and human interest or emotional appeals on the other. The author and an Ohio University graduate student in journalism rated stories as to position on the hard-soft dichotomy. Stories at various points on the continuum were used in the experiment, but those items leading to disagreement between the two judges were discarded.

Remaining stories were divided into two sets of 16 each:

1. One set to be judged in measuring predictive success and congruency, as well as agreement. This batch was called the experimental set.
2. On set(labelled the ref set) to be judged initially by audience members or "predictees." Data generated in this way were then given to editors or "predictors" to be used as a basis for estimating audience rankings of the experimental set.

In using information about ranking of past stories, an editor would presumably need to look for parallels between stories in the ref set and those in the experimental set. The literature seems to suggests no dimensions of similarity clearly apt to prove fruitful in drawing such parallels. However, two types of distinctions which editors often claim to use were kept in mind in constructing the experimental and ref sets:

1. General topic heading. In 10 cases, one story was assigned to the ref set and one to experimental where both dealt with a broad issue or area of concern. For instance, a ref-set item about President Nixon talking with Premier Sato of Japan and an experimental-set story on a proposed Russian loan to Chile both dealt with super-power efforts to solidify their spheres of influence. A ref-set story on Angela Davis's personal appeal for bail and an experimental-set piece on dismissal of a contempt citation against Father James E. Groppi of Milwaukee both dealt with American protestors and dissidents. Other general topics reflected in both sets were Ohio's judicial-penal system, the nation's policy on human and natural resources, cruelty and immorality in today's world, the vulnerability of U. S. troops in Vietnam, vice, the 1972 presidential election, government handling of militancy, and Ohio University's internal administrative problems.
2. Specific running stories. In six cases, one story was placed in the ref set and one in experimental where both items focused on a specific running story which remained in the news for some time. For example, a ref-set item announced that President Nixon's Peking visit would be televised while an experimental-set story specified that 80 people would be in the president's press party. A ref-set story announced the overthrow of Premier Busia's Ghanian government while an experimental-set item reported the later arrest of a Busia aide.

Other running stories dealt with Bangla Desh, the Howard Hughes autobiography case, the Middle East conflict and the proposed closing of a laboratory elementary school at Ohio University.

Ref stories ran in newspapers about one to two weeks earlier than experimental stories.

Subjects

Editors or predictors were 78 students in two upper division journalism courses at Ohio University. All but five were communication majors with past course work in reporting and editing. Thus most predictors presumably had at least been exposed to the perspective of the working journalist.

Audience members or predictees included 19 self-selected students from a freshman introductory course in mass communication, 26 students from an introductory psychology course taken by a broad cross-section of Ohio University underclassmen and 33 members of an intermediate reporting class in the university's School of Journalism.

Each group of subjects participated in two testing sessions. Only those at both sessions were retained in the editor and audience groups. Attrition due to non-attendance was only 1% among predictors, 10% among predictees.

Preparation of test materials

The first four paragraphs of each story were reproduced by ditto, double-spaced on about one-half sheet of paper. Within each set, packets of stories were arranged in six random orders prior to each testing session at which subjects ranked them.

In ranking a given set, a subject would first read the 16 items carefully. He would then single out the most and least interesting stories to provide a frame of reference for use in judging the remaining 14. When a packet was sorted with the no. 1 story on top, no. 16 on the bottom, and so on, the subject recorded his preferences on a separate sheet of paper. He was permitted to change his mind as often as he wished.

Subjects were instructed to imagine each story had just broken, though many items were two to 10 weeks old at the times of the various rankings.

Manipulation of independent variable

All editors were informed that audience members were part-time residents of Athens County, but not necessarily Ohio University students. It was emphasized that other part-time residents include student spouses and employees at the Athens Mental Health Center. This was done to encourage predictor judgment in a "part-time Athens resident" context and thereby minimize the use of stereotypes about students and about native Athenians(university students are thought to see the latter as rather archaic small-town conservatives).

The control-group predictors were told nothing beyond the above about their predictee partners. To avoid a feeling of hopelessness, instructions did note that prediction based on such sketchy information is often attempted----in fact, most working editors have little more to go on.

In the value-salience condition, predictees were given one sheet of paper listing the 18 terminal values or life goals defined by Rokeach(11). Each person placed a 1 before the value most important to him personally, an 18 before the least important value, and so on until all 18 were ranked.

Each predictee's rankings were then transferred to a separate information sheet, which was given to the appropriate predictor at the time of the prediction task(PO ranking as defined below). This was done to insure that editors did not see audience handwriting or names.

In the ref condition, audience members ranked the 16 ref-set stories. Rankings were transferred to separate information sheets. Then, for the prediction task, each predictor received: a)his partner's stack of ref stories ordered from 1 on top to 16 on the bottom, and b) an information sheet for "back-up" use in case the stack became shuffled.

Ref-group editors were urged to look for parallels between the ref and experimental sets of stories. The researcher did not spell out specific examples or types of parallels.

Criterion measures and design of study

Each editor was matched randomly with one audience member at the start of the study. In this way, 78 dyads were formed.

The experimental set of stories was sorted in three ways:

1. The editor gave his own(predictor's self or PS) ranking.
2. The audience member listed his preferences(other's self ranking or OS).
3. The editor indicated what he felt would be his audience-member partner's listing. This ranking was called PO(predictor's assessment of other).

As suggested by the co-orientation model, three separate indices were computed for each dyad:

1. An index of agreement($r_{s(ps,os)}$). In analyses stemming from the four principle hypotheses, this variable was controlled by matching. Wackman(15) noted that such control is important because predicting the preferences of a person like oneself is doubtless generally easier than predicting the behavior of a "horse of a different color."

2. The index of projection or congruency($r_{s(po,ps)}$). This measure indicated to what extent an editor ~~simply~~ attributed his own preferences to his audience member.

3. The index of predictive accuracy($r_{s(po,os)}$). This would seem to be the payoff index practically as well as theoretically---the fundamental goal of audience study by editors.

Each editor and audience member took part in two testing sessions as follows:

1. Session 1 for editors. Subjects here gave their own (PS) rankings of the experimental set of stories along with their rankings(labelled PV) of Rokeach's 18 terminal values. These data were collected on Feb. 15, 1972.

2. Session 1 for audience members. OS(audience members' rankings of experimental stories) and OV(value-salience) data were collected here. Most subjects came in between Feb. 18 and 22, a few up to one week later.

3. Session 2 for audience members. Predictees here ranked the ref set of stories. These sessions were held in the period of Feb. 25-9.

4. Session 2 for editors. By the time of these sessions in early March, the researcher had computed indices of agreement($r_{s(ps,os)}$) for each of the 78 dyads. He had also matched on agreement by a)ranking the dyads from highest to lowest in $r_{s(ps,os)}$ and b) within each stratum of three dyads in the resulting array, randomly assigning dyads to treatments. In any given stratum, one dyad went into the control group, one into value-salience, and one into the ref condition.

Statistical analysis

In most analyses, the criterion measures were in the form of Spearman rank correlation coefficients. Statisticians appear to be somewhat unclear in attributing clear meaning, on an interval scale, to r_s. Therefore, the non-parametric Wilcoxen signed-ranks matched-pairs and Kruskal-Wallis tests were used where appropriate to test between-group differences in r_s.

FINDINGS

Table 1 shows the median indices of accuracy and projection for control-group dyads, those in which editors got value-salience data, and those in which editors received audience rankings of the ref set of news stories.

A Wilcoxen signed-ranks matched-pairs test revealed higher predictive success for ref-group editors than for control editors($T=38$, $p<.001$). Thus hypothesis 1 was confirmed.

While the value-salience group's indices of accuracy exceeded those in the control group as predicted in hypothesis 2, the difference did not approach significance($T=135.5$, $p>.05$).

Surprisingly, the indices of congruency ran somewhat higher in the value-salience and ref conditions than in the control group. However, T-values (200 with the value-salience group, 185 with the ref condition) revealed no significant differences between experimental and control conditions. Thus hypotheses 3 and 4 were not confirmed.

SUGGEST PLACING TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Several exploratory analyses were done to further gauge possible impact of value profile on news judgment.

First, for each of the 78 dyads, a Spearman rank correlation coefficient was computed between the editor's value-salience ranking and the audience member's. This statistic was called the index of value-homophily. Then a rank correlation was computed across all dyads between the index of value-homophily and the index of agreement in ranking the experimental stories. The overall correlation was .09, which did not approach significance at the .05 level. Thus there was no evidence that people with similar value profiles tended to judge news alike.

Second, in the value-salience conditions, editors learned to their audience-member partners' value-salience rankings. An indication that one's partner has a value profile very different from his (the editor's) own might lead an editor to avoid projecting in prediction of news preferences. However, within the value-salience group, the rank correlation between value-homophily and news-judging congruency was a non-significant - .08.

Third, the researcher noted much variation in ranking salvation as a major life goal. Surprisingly, 55% of the editors ranked salvation 17th or 18th among the 18 life goals. Furthermore, 54% of the audience members ranked salvation 16th, 17th or 18th. Splitting each group into high-and-low salvation categories seemed reasonable since a person ranking salvation as high as 15th or 16th would seem to show at least some belief in life after death.

As indicated in table 2, indices of new-judging agreement ran substantially higher with dyads where both editor and audience member ranked salvation "high" than where either or both members of a dyad ranked it low. A Kruskal-Wallis test revealed significant variation among the four groups ($H=11.94$, $p<.01$), and most of the variation lay between the high-high condition and the other three groups.

SUGGEST PLACING TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Obviously people who believed salvation was at least meaningful tended to agree on news judgment more than do dyads in which at least one person is a "non-believer." This finding is exploratory, of course. In the future, the researcher might subject value-profile data to Q-analysis. He could then see if certain Q-types of predictors and predictees differ systematically in news-judging agreement as well as predictive accuracy.

DISCUSSION

As expected, reasoning from one sample of stories to another helped aid prediction within the news judging process.

Future research is needed to explore the most useful parallels between ref and experimental sets of stories. The two types of parallels used here---general topic heading and focus on a single "running" story---were chosen because many working journalists say they are meaningful. Other story attributes such as hard or soft news value might prove fruitful. Several studies suggest that distinction is meaningful to journalists(for a review, see 6, p. 167).

Somewhat surprisingly, informing editors about audience values and preferences did not reduce projection or congruency. Apparently the ref data supplemented and did not replace the predictor's own preferences as a perceptual anchor in predicting audience behavior.

While value-salience information did not appear to influence the predictive process, it did exert some influence on self-preferences for news. Specifically, predictor-predictee dyads in which both members showed some belief in salvation as a life goal agreed more highly on news judgment than did other dyads.

One methodological problem is apparent. Editors in the present study dealt with individual audience members. Real-life editors, on the other hand, predict to an aggregate audience. As Wackman (15) and MacLeod, et al (9) point out, the two processes differ in several ways. However, the present approach seems defensible here for at least two reasons:

1. This study sought to explore the impact of various types of audience information on the predictive process. Such research may suggest fruitful hypotheses for later studies involving prediction to an aggregate audience.
2. In recent years, general-circulation magazines such as Life and the old Saturday Evening Post have been on the decline. Meanwhile, specialized publications ranging from Swimming Pool Age to Psychology Today have been growing. As new technology accelerates the trend toward specialized media, in the opinion of many observers, "mass" communicators will address more and more small, homogeneous audiences rather than broad aggregates. As this change progresses, research on predicting preferences of individual audience members may make increasing sense.

Certainly, modern polling technology makes it possible to regularly collect data about audience preferences at reasonable cost. Such data make it possible for editors to attempt the type of predictive process studied here.

Finally, the editorial game as a teaching-learning device seems promising for many areas in addition to mass communication. Predictive success or understanding sans agreement is surely a goal of many educators. A useful extension of the "game" would involve a)pairing up receivers or audience members with each other and computing "before" measures of agreement, congruency and understanding, b) having people within each dyad talk over their differences, and c) using similar stimuli in an "after" measure of co-orientation variables. Comparison of "before" with "after" scores would permit a researcher to assess impact of the editorial or predictive game on inter-personal relations.

Table 1

Mean Indices of Accuracy($r_{s(po,os)}$) and Projection ($r_{s(po,ps)}$) for the Control, Value-Salience and Ref Groups

	Control	Value-salience	Ref
Index of Accuracy	.08	.115	.35
Index of Projection (Congruency)	.235	.355	.355

Table 2

Median Indices of Agreement($r_{s(ps,os)}$) for Dyads in which Predictor and Predictee, Respectively, Place High and Low Emphasis on Salvation as a Life Goal

		Predictor ranking of salvation	
	High (15th place and above	Low(17th and 18th)	High(16th and above)
		.195 (n=20)	.39 (n=15)
Predictee ranking of salvation	Low (16th, 17th, and 18th)	.185 (n=22)	.20 (n=19)

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